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Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
Jihadist Use of Social Media –
How to Prevent Terrorism and Preserve Innovation

Good afternoon, Chairman Meehan, Ranking Member Speier, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today to discuss the nature and threat posed by Jihadist use of social media.

Introduction
I have been investigating terrorist use of the Internet for roughly 10 years.[1] For the past two years, I have analyzed the YouTube accounts of al-Qaida supporters who have attempted a terrorist attack, or have been arrested on terrorism charges. What I find most alarming is that each time I look at someone new, I find I already have data on them as a result of their being part of the same global community of extremists.

Two degrees of separation
Taimour al-Abdaly launched a complex attack on Stockholm, Sweden. He was killed when one of his bombs detonated prematurely.[2] He used Facebook primarily to keep in touch with family, with one exception. That exception was a known associate of American al-Qaida operative Samir Khan.[3] al-Abdaly was also an avid consumer of al-Qaida and related extremist videos, as well as of *nasheeds – a cappella* songs that celebrate violent jihad and death by martyrdom. However, he made little use of YouTube for social networking, a fact that may reflect some amount of training in operational security.[4]

Taimour al-Abdaly was connected to Arid Uka,[5] a young man who opened fire on a busload of US military personnel at the airport in Frankfurt, Germany, killing two. Particularly in the case of homegrown violent extremists, terrorism seems to be as much an expression of an identity as of ideology, and the Internet provides an ample supply of imagery, music, and text from which the aspiring terrorist can assemble their identity. In the case of al-Abdaly and Uka, the common element was the *nasheed*.[6] They shared the same supplier – an as yet unidentified individual, most

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[1] A significant portion of that work finds expression on the Internet Haganah blog (internet-haganah.com), the site of SoFIR (sofir.org), and now the Internet Haganah Forum (forum.internet-haganah.com) and on Twitter (@webradius).
[2] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007103.html
[3] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007132.html
[4] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007107.html
[5] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007251.html
[6] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007194.html

likely also in Europe, who was well known to other extremists on account of his work as a curator of extremist songs. The choice of the word *supplier* is deliberate, and there is a similarity to be seen with drug dealing. Such suppliers link many of the extremists I have studied. They are people who have acquired a reputation online of having an ample supply of "the good stuff," generally videos, audio files (e.g. *nasheeds*), and literature, all of an extremist nature.

Arid Uka was connected to Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, who is alleged to have plotted with friends to attack a military facility in Seattle, Washington.[7] They were linked through multiple individuals on YouTube who all associated with a highly radicalized Salafist organization operating in Cologne and Frankfurt, Germany.[8] The organization, *Die Wahre Religion*, is led by Ibrahim Abou-Nagie, who is currently under indictment for inciting violence and calling for the destruction of other religions.[9] Abdul-Latif represents a not-uncommon type of extremist activism on YouTube. His channel served as a virtual pulpit from which he preached regularly in video sermons that almost no one came to hear. As he began to move forward with his plot, his comments on other YouTube channels became increasingly shrill,[10] yet he stopped short of saying anything that might have warranted opening an investigation. While his words may not have clearly indicated terrorist intent, Abdul-Latif was linked via YouTube to a well-known network of homegrown violent extremists here in the United States.[11]

Abdul-Latif had friends in common with Jubair Ahmad of Woodbridge, Virginia, who has been charged with being a member of Lashkar-e-Taiba, and making videos for that designated terrorist organization.[12] The common link was once again individuals associated with *Die Wahre Religion*.[13] Ahmad's alleged membership and direct communications with a bona fide terrorist organization is not something one often sees in open sources of intelligence. His work as a curator of Lashkar-e-Taiba videos appears to be what led to many extremists to link to him (and likely also brought him to the attention of the FBI).

Jubair Ahmad had connections to Elkhadir Atrash, who was arrested on charges of organizing a homegrown al-Qaida cell based in northern Israel.[14] Like Ahmad, Atrash was a supplier, curating YouTube videos of two extremist clerics, Abu Nur al-

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[7] USA v Abdul-Latif & Mujahidh, complaint available at http://s88179113.onlinehome.us/2011-06-25/USA_v_Abdul-Latif_et-al%20Complaint.pdf

[8] http://forum.internet-haganah.com/showthread.php?146

[9] http://www.taz.de/Anklage-gegen-Hassprediger/!77963/

[10] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007379.html

[11] Ibid.

[12] http://www.fbi.gov/washingtondc/press-releases/2011/woodbridge-man-charged-with-providing-material-support-to-terrorist-organization

[13] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007423.html

[14] http://forum.internet-haganah.com/showthread.php?150

Maqdisi of Gaza, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi of Jordan.[15] In addition to Jubair Ahmad, Atrash was connected to a broad range of homegrown violent extremists in the United States, throughout Europe, and in Australia.[16] There is no evidence that extremists must progress through online activism to involvement in real world terrorist activity. Generally it seems there is interplay between the two realms. Nevertheless, Atrash is representative of extremists who engage in online activism while toiling away at the more laborious task of assembling a cell that can engage in terrorism, or making the connections necessary to travel to some field of jihad.

These al Qaida supporters – part of a global network whose number I estimate at a few thousand – were all connected within two or three degrees of each other on YouTube. The connections between them should be assumed to be weak, rather than strong, but that is not to say such weak ties are unimportant.[17] While a terrorist cell will be composed of strongly-tied individuals, it will be from within a weakly-tied community that they emerge. Weak ties are the paths along which information flows, including militant ideology, and intelligence regarding both potential targets for terrorism as well as counter terrorism activities. Conversely, the weakness of strong ties is that information no longer flows effectively. In the life cycle of terrorist movements and organizations, one sees again and a again a particular process: successful counter terrorism activity, generally in the form of arrests and prosecutions, causes communities of extremists to fracture. Weak ties break, leaving the strongly-tied units with fewer sources of support and intelligence. This makes them more vulnerable to counter terrorism, and the process repeats itself.[18]

Media, computer-mediated communications, and violence[19]
Terrorism – violence for political aims – requires a steady output of media for the movement to remain relevant, to maintain morale, and to recruit new members. For the terrorist organization or movement, the low cost and ease of access of the Internet make it an ideal channel for the distribution of terrorist media. Terrorism is also a social phenomenon. Individuals may act alone, but in almost all cases, the terrorist is a product of a community of extremists. The genuine lone wolf is extremely rare. Because of their political and social needs, social media sites are very attractive to violent extremists. But this fails to explain how the combination of people, media, and technology contributes to the problem of homegrown violent extremism.

Computers affect how we experience media and how we interact with others. Extremists are as susceptible to these effects as we are. The online environment is

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[15] Ibid.

[16] http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007426.html

[17] For a discussion of weak and strong ties, see 'The Strength of Weak Ties' by Mark S. Granovetter, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, No. 6 (May, 1973).

[18] The history of the decline and fall of the German R.A.F. is a classic example of these processes at work.

[19] For a thorough review of these issues, see *Jihad, Crime, and the Internet* by Erez, Weimann, and Weisburd, NIJ2006-IJ-CX-0038 (in press), pp. 21-30.

immersive. We feel we are in a place, often called cyberspace. When we are on a social media site, we feel that we are virtually together with our friends, family, and comrades in arms. We feel we are present in the videos we watch. Online interaction brings people closer, faster. Online relationships get off to a strong start, and then move offline if possible. In the case of two people seeking a soulmate, the result may be a happy union. In the case of aspiring terrorists, the result may be less positive. Online social networks tend to mirror offline social networks. People – extremists included – use social media to keep in touch with people they already know. An individual's ability to get involved in terrorism is directly related to who they know, and this is precisely what social media sites reveal to us. The benefits of this to law enforcement are enormous.

In terrorist media, the single most common element is violence.[20] Half of all terrorist videos contain explicit, deadly violence. The effects of exposure to such violence are profoundly negative. The deciding factor in whether that exposure contributes to future violent behavior is *context*. The context in which extremists experience terrorist media is not merely supportive of violence – it presents violence as absolutely essential.

Samir Khan, Anwar al-Awlaki, and Inspire magazine
Each new edition of Inspire was celebrated as a victory, as an attack in itself. In that sense, the deaths of al-Awlaki and Khan can only help in the battle against homegrown violent extremists. There will be no more such events to celebrate. Neither of them is easily replaced, and in the event the magazine is re-launched, it is worth noting that the work involved in producing the magazine likely contributed to the successful targeting of al-Awlaki. Finally, information does not preserve itself in perpetuity on the Internet. If Inspire magazine remains available for download, it will only be because activists continue to upload it, and every upload of Inspire magazine is an event that will leave a trail, and is an act that – in light of the content of the magazine – can likely be investigated and prosecuted.

Countermeasures
The US intelligence community is already making very effective use of the Internet to identify and investigate extremists. Some additional actions can contribute to undermining the processes that enable extremists to engage in violence.

Producing and distributing media for Foreign Terrorist Organizations constitutes material support for terrorism. I would argue that a service provider who knowingly assists in the distribution of terrorist media is also culpable. While it is in no one's interests to prosecute internet service providers, they must be made to realize that they can neither turn a blind eye to the use of their services by terrorist organizations, nor can they continue to put the onus of identifying and removing terrorist media on private citizens. I don't believe that Google, operator of YouTube,

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[20] Ibid., and Comparison of Visual Motifs in Jihadi and Cholo Videos on YouTube by A. Aaron Weisburd (2009), in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32:12 1066-1074.

has an interest in promoting violent extremism, and they have already made some effort to address this issue, but they can and should do more.

Branding in terrorist media is a sign of authenticity, and terrorist media is readily identifiable as such due to the presence of trademarks known to be associated with particular organizations. The objective should be not to drive all terrorist media offline, but to drive it to the margins and deprive it of the power of branding, as well as to leave homegrown extremists unable to verify the authenticity of any given product.

Conclusion
Chairman Meehan and Ranking Member Speier, I would like to conclude by thanking you for your service and for your leadership in addressing this issue.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.